Early French Quarter Hotels

According to the Guinness Book of World Records, the oldest hotel still in operation is the *Hoshi Ryokan*, in the *Awazu Onsen* area of Komatsu, Ishikawa, Japan, which opened in the year 717 (1,001 years before the founding of New Orleans). It had its start as a spa on an underground hot spring, which was built by the Hoshi family because (according to legend) the god of Mount Hakusan ordered it.

The word *hotel* comes to us from the French *hôtel* (which, in turn, comes from *hôte* meaning *host*). The original *hôtel* referred to a townhouse or any other structure "seeing" frequent visitors, rather than a place that actually offered a place to stay. The French spelling features the circumflex (or little roof) over the 'o' that replaces the 's' that once existed in the earlier *hostel* spelling. *Hostel* over time took on a new, but somewhat different meaning. Hostels tend to offer budget-minded accommodations, generally more informal and oriented toward "adventure travel" over "leisure travel" (thereby attracting a usually younger crowd).

L'Hôtel Suisse, Nice, France, old postcard view

According to John Kendall in his *History of New Orleans* (1922), "the social life of New Orleans" (for those many years before the American Civil War) "revolved around its great hotels to a degree greater than

was the case, probably, in any other American city." He writes that the first recorded hotel in the Crescent City was the *Hôtel d'Orléans*, erected in 1799 by Samuel Moore, which had a "long and eventful history". It was eventually demolished in 1907.

The next hotels were Marti's Hotel on Chartres Street below St. Louis (later known as the *Hôtel des Étrangers*), built in 1812 (host to the Marquis de Lafayette on his 1825 visit to the city and in 1834 to Napoleon's physician, Antommarchi), and the *Hôtel Trémoulet*, at the corner of St. Peter and *rue de La Levée*), "which the architect, Latrobe, has left us some picturesque impressions, in his diary." At another early hotel, the *Hôtel de la Marine*, one could encounter the Lafitte brothers engaged in some profitable (if not quite legal) enterprise. Dr. Antommarchi is noted for having presented Napoleon's bronze death mask as a gift to the Crescent City, now displayed at the Louisiana State Museum in New Orleans.

What must that scene along the riverfront have looked like to visitors staying at these early hotels? It was surely populated by an adventurous lot of Caribbean exiles and seaman, flatboatmen from up the Mississippi, plus an assortment of filibusters, smugglers and pirates – plus all manner of people, buying and selling.

While staying at the *Trémoulet* in 1818, Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1764 – 1820) did a watercolor sketch of a gentleman seated comfortably on a rooftop *azotea* in a *Campeachy* chair overlooking the ships along the river. For more on these topics, see my articles "Campeachy" (on the *Campeachy* chair), "Up on the *Azotea*" (explaining terraced rooftops) and "400 Rabbits, a Pig and a Whistle" (on early New Orleans taverns). As for Latrobe's sketch, see below:

Latrobe's watercolor sketch viewed from the Hôtel Trémoulet

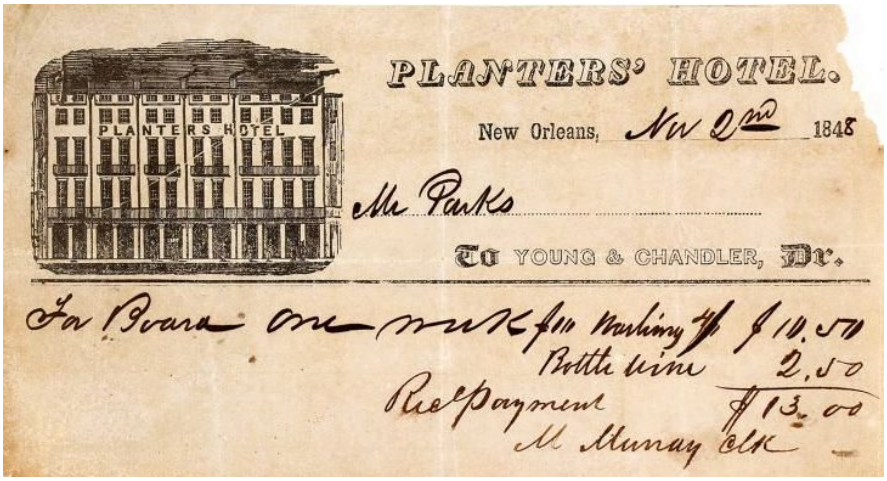
Kendall tells us that it "was not till about 1830, during the 'flush times,' when New Orleans expanded in every direction, and grew rapidly in wealth and power, that the first of its great hotels came into existence."

Soon there would be a great rivalry between the Americans with their St. Charles Hotel in the *Faubourg Ste. Marie* and the Creoles and their St. Louis Hotel in the *Vieux Carré* (originally called the City Exchange after the popular café and bar already on the site). Kendall wrote, "Both of these splendid buildings owed their existence to banking companies chartered by the Legislature, in that epoch of highly

speculative enterprise, when most of the solid improvements made in the city were involved in banking schemes of a more or less insecure kind. In return for the public improvements which these banks undertook to make, they secured the right to issue money. This policy had on the surface a double advantage — it built up the city rapidly, and it greatly increased its banking capital. At one time this capital aggregated $40,000,000, when New York could not boast of half as much. As a matter of fact, this fevered development resulted in great financial disaster; which was reflected in the history of many of the enterprises sponsored by these companies, notably in the case of the Improvement Bank, which erected the St. Louis Hotel. The Exchange Bank, which built the St. Charles, fared better."

These hotels were erected roughly about the same time, each costing $1,000,000 or more to construct. The City Exchange (on St. Louis and Chartres) cost $1.5 million. The St. Charles was the first large building erected above Canal Street. Before expanding on the history of the St. Louis Hotel, a few words must be said about other French Quarter hotels of the 1800s.

Situated at the corner of Chartres and St. Peter streets was a building which, in the early part of the nineteenth century, was renowned as a hotel and restaurant (or tavern) under the name of *Le Veau qui Tête.*



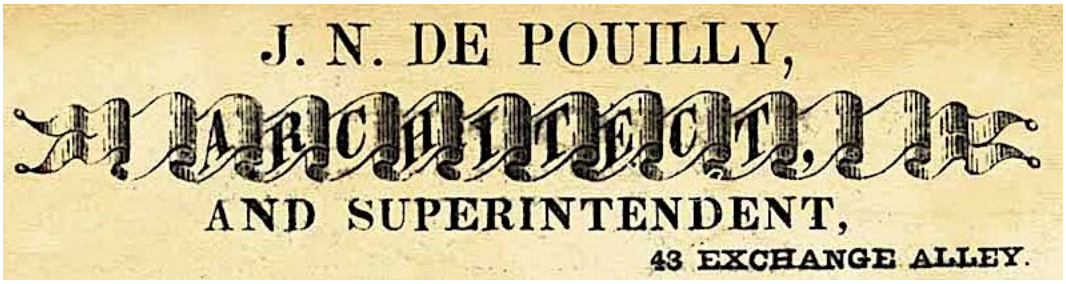
The Planters' Hotel (originally called the Bruno Hotel), was located at the corner of Dauphine and Iberville streets. It was opened in 1906, and then renovated and refurnished in 1919. Hotel Bero could be found at 226 Bourbon Street, run by Mrs. Victor Bero, whose husband was the proprietor of the popular Victor's Restaurant across the street at 209 Bourbon. When Victor Bero first opened his restaurant, it was a

modest eatery of the kind common in France, with hams and game hanging in the windows. When Victor decided to retire in 1905, Jean Galatoire bought him out, modernized the restaurant, and Galatoire's was born (now over a century old).

The Cosmopolitan Hotel (known for being the scene of "making and breaking" numerous Crescent City politicians for more than fifty years) was (and still is) located in the 100 block of Royal Street. In 1920, a new owner renovated the structure and renamed it the Hotel Astor. The hotel's Bourbon Street annex was demolished in the 1940s, but the historic old building's façade (though down on its luck) is still prominent today. Recent plans were in store for the site, with hopes of renovating the existing building and adding a twenty-six story condominium-hotel tower behind it (on the portion of the property facing Bourbon Street). The owners, however, had difficulties securing the necessary height restriction waiver.

Cosmopolitan Hotel in the 1890s

Returning to the history of the St. Louis Hotel, which was designed by Jacques Nicolas Bussière de Pouilly, it was constructed beginning in the year 1836 (the first St. Charles Hotel was completed a short time later, in 1842). De Pouilly was an accomplished French architect who had settled in New Orleans a few years before. The idea was to recreate the charm of the Rue de Rivoli in Paris. De Pouilly's plans called for an edifice in the Tuscan Doric style, but his design was never fully carried out. The materials for the structure were imported from France. The first St. Charles Hotel was designed by the architectural team of Dakin & Gallier.

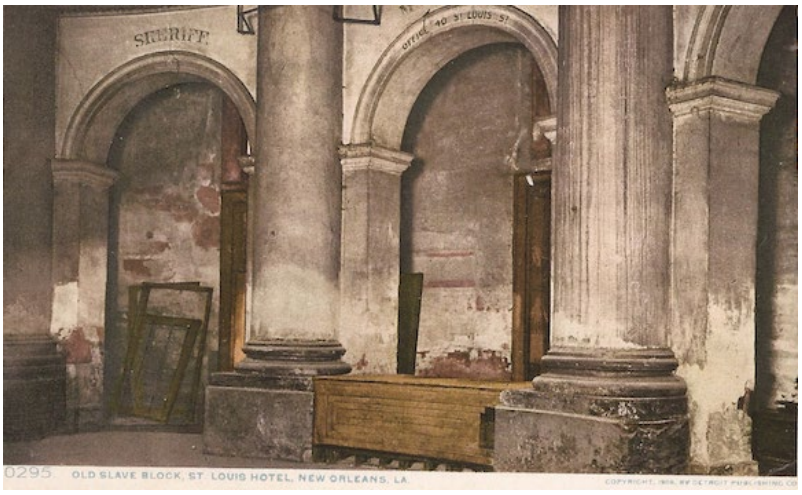


Jacques Nicolas Bussière de Pouilly, died February 24, 1875, at age 70

But it was at the St. Louis that the politicians liked to stay when they were in the city. Heading up the building of this hotel was Pierre Soulé (1801 – 1870), later U.S. Minister to Spain, who ended up facing financial ruin as a result of the enterprise. As originally envisioned, the St. Louis was to be far grander than the St. Charles, but the crisis of 1837 intervened (resulting in building modifications and cost reductions). The hotel's first manager was Pierre Maspero, and (as its original name indicates) the main purpose of the City Exchange was to supply a venue for businessmen to meet. The ballroom was secondary, while the rotunda in the center of the building was the main feature of

de Pouilly's design. The main entrance was on St. Louis Street, under a Doric portico of six columns. The rotunda was the place where all manner of business was transacted (including the sale of slaves). The St. Louis became the assembly place of the city's auctioneers, with stocks, real estate and human beings being offered for sale.

Pierre Soulé



"Old Slave Block, St. Louis Hotel"

The hotel was destroyed by fire in 1841, but was almost immediately rebuilt using de Pouilly's original plans at a cost of $600,000. The hotel became the site of New Orleans' most lavish banquets and balls throughout the 1840s up until the Civil War. In 1842, room rates were $2.50 per day.

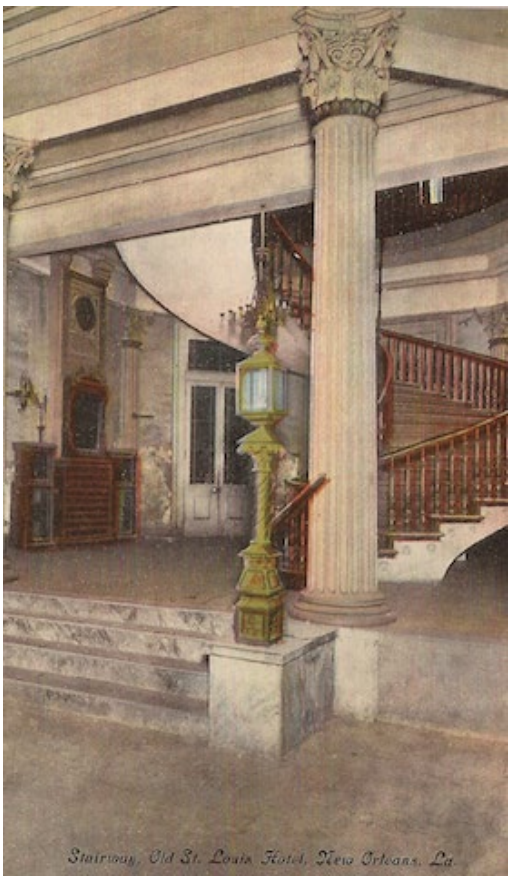
The St. Louis Hotel as it appeared in a 1906 postcard view

The above postcard provides some interesting facts about the "Hotel St. Louis, once Hotel Royal": "This hotel has seen many singular vicissitudes. It has been a statehouse and a besieged fortress."

With the establishment of individual exchanges for the purpose of special lines of business, the patronage of the St. Louis (as the hotel came to be called after the fire) receded. The rotunda, however, up until the Civil War, was a favorite assembly spot for both of Democrats and Whigs.

Statesmen, royalty, distinguished writers and other famous men and women were banqueted in great style at the St. Louis Hotel. Maspero, the first manager, was succeeded by a Mr. Alvarez, whose assistant, was Joseph Santini. They were followed by James Hewlett, who Kendall describes as having "already won a position of importance in the gastronomic history of the city". The St. Louis under Hewlett's management, he says "reached its meridian of splendor". It was then that the famous balls were inaugurated, including the "bal travesti" of the winter of 1842-43, at which Henry Clay was grandly entertained at a cost of $20,000. In that ballroom, too, were held the sessions of the State Legislature of 1845. Don Pedro, Emperor of Brazil, and afterwards his grandson were guests of the hotel. And William McKinley was honored at a banquet there on his first visit to New Orleans, while Governor of Ohio (before being elected President). At one time, General Boulanger, who almost pulled off the overthrow of the French Republic was a guest of the hotel.

Surrounding the rotunda in the new structure were galleries and arcades, to which the public had access, except on Sundays. The hotel's lower floor was primarily occupied by banks, stores and business offices. The vestibule was 127 feet wide and 40 deep. Also, at the intersection of Chartres and St. Louis, was the Improvement Bank's main office, to which the hotel owed its creation. As for the hotel's capacity, there were accommodations for 200 guests.



Views of the Stairway and Rotunda, Old St. Louis Hotel

Legends abound concerning creations from the St. Louis Hotel. Creole Gumbo (thick with seafood and okra) is said to have been invented by a Spaniard working there at the Exchange. The thick *bouillabaisse*-like soup most likely originated in South Louisiana a century before, but the myth remains. Scholars and chefs argue over whether it was named after one of its two main ingredients, filé or okra. In the Bantu language spoken by many slaves from West Africa, okra was called *kigombo* and is the origin of its name in Spanish, Portuguese and French. Via Caribbean Spanish *guingambó* or *quimbombó*, it is believed the word *gumbo* made its way to New Orleans. Or was it because in the native Choctaw language filé (meaning ground sassafras leaves) was called *kombo*?

The concept of the "free lunch" (a sales enticement that offers a meal at no cost in order to attract customers) is also reported to have possibly originated at the St. Louis. In 1875 *The New York Times* described this as a "custom peculiar to the Crescent City", saying that "In every one of the drinking saloons which fill the city a meal of some

sort is served free every day." Such a repast might include "immense dishes of butter", large baskets of bread, meat pies, oyster patties, oyster soup, rounds of beef or ham, stewed mutton, potatoes and "macaroni *à la Français"*. The *Times* reporter noticed that "the price charged for every kind of liquor was fifteen cents, punches and cobblers costing no more than a glass of ale". A custom copied by other cafés and bars of the time, there is today (I'm afraid) no such thing as a "free lunch".

Another first for the Saint Louis (according to "legend") was the creation of the "cocktail" a drink served at the Saint Louis in an egg cup called a "*coquetier*". Some linguists speculate the Creole's corruption of "*coquetier*" into "cocktail" to be the origin of the term, although this myth has now been debunked. A number of earlier references exist, but the following mention (and definition) is perhaps the most amusing. It appeared in the May 13, 1806, edition of *The Balance and Columbian Repository*, a Hudson, New York publication, in which an answer was provided to the question, "What is a cocktail?" It answered:

"Cock-tail is a stimulating liquor, composed of spirits of any kind, sugar, water, and bitters — it is vulgarly called *bittered sling*, and is supposed to be an excellent electioneering potion, inasmuch as it renders the heart stout and bold, at the same time that it fuddles the head. It is said, also to be of great use to a democratic candidate: because a person, having swallowed a glass of it, is ready to swallow any thing else." The City Exchange (aka the St. Louis), however, didn't begin construction until thirty years after this definition.

The Civil War came to New Orleans in 1862 after Flag Officer David G. Farragut, who commanded the Union fleet, broke through defenses to capture the city. The Saint Louis Hotel became a military hospital for the duration of the war.

During Reconstruction, the hotel passed through numerous hands until it was sold to the State of Louisiana in order to become the capitol building (seat of the radical "Carpetbagger Legislature") in 1874. Endless wrangling among factions was the norm, and General Phil Sheridan at one point drove out the legislature in session at the point of a bayonet. When the Bourbon Democrats regained power in 1882, Baton Rouge once again became the state capital. The hotel carried on under various managers for another forty years, each striving to make the hotel a success again. Finally, the building was sold back to the state and its doors closed about the turn of the century. Tour

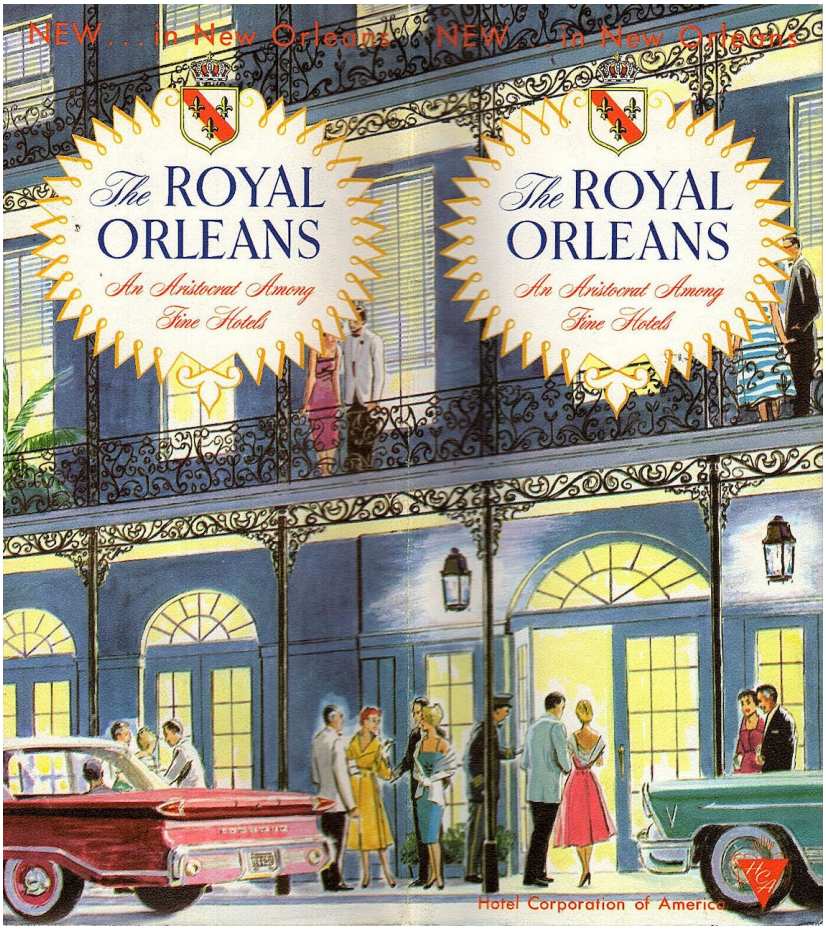
guides took visitors through the gradually decaying ruins of the neglected hotel. By 1912, there were mules stabled within and bats in the rooms. The great hurricane of 1915 delivered some powerful punches which finished off the previously proud palace.

The site was home to a praline shop and a lumber yard when philanthropists Edgar and Edith Stern hired attorney Lester Kabacoff to assist in the planning and building of another "St. Louis Hotel" as part of an effort to revitalize a declining *Vieux Carré*. The idea was that of hotelier Lyle Aschaffenburg, who'd created the Pontchartrain Hotel on St. Charles Avenue. In 1948, Stern and son Edgar Jr. moved in to establish WDSU-TV next door, which remained a neighbor of the hotel until 1996 when the station relocated. Eventually, Roger Sonnabend of Hotel Corporation of America (now Sonesta) agreed to come on board to manage the hotel with the condition that it had to be big enough to be profitable. That was one of the reasons for its earlier commercial failures (the first St. Charles Hotel boasted 350 rooms).

Original hotel façade incorporated into present-day Royal Orleans

Please notice "Exchange" above the first fan window.

A battle developed, and it came down to the preservationists (who wanted to save the charm of the French Quarter) versus the need for at least 300 rooms to be financially viable. The structure couldn't be much higher than the original structure, so architect Arthur Davis' concepts were repeatedly rejected. Architect Sam Wilson Jr. was hired to design what people would see from the street while Davis continued to design the inside. Exacting drawings which incorporated the remaining arches of the original St. Louis Hotel, attention to historical detail and duplication of the Spanish wrought iron railings won over the Commission. Certain design effects gave the impression that the total number of stories of the new hotel were of a similar visual scale as the three stories of the original St. Louis. A rooftop garden with pool was also part of the design. Soon the "Royal Orleans" opened to much fanfare in 1960.


NEW . . . in New Orleans. NEW . . . in New Orleans
The ROYAL ORLEANS
An Aristocrat Among Fine Hotels
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An Aristocrat Among Fine Hotels
Hotel Corporation of America

The Royal Orleans, as featured in a 1960s promotional brochure

The new Royal Orleans was an immediate success as its forerunner, the Saint Louis Hotel, had been. Gracing such a strategic French Quarter location, the hotel became frequented by entertainers, politicians and the local elite alike. Conventions, private parties, weddings and business meetings kept the hotel extremely active. The hotel was profitable within two years (to the surprise of many) and the owners wanted to add more rooms on a penthouse floor. A mansard roof (a story within a roof that doesn't look like an additional story) in the original design drawings for the Saint Louis, was the factor that convinced enough *Vieux Carré* Commissioners to permit the expansion. Today there are 346 rooms.

With some of the country's most successful French and Creole restaurants within walking distance from the new hotel, the *Rib Room* has become famous in its own right for excellent cuisine. It is particularly popular at lunch on Fridays, especially with lawyers and politicians. And the *Touché Lounge*, with its own access off Royal Street, has been a favorite watering hole in the *Vieux Carré*.

The hotel (originally managed under a lease to Sonesta Corporation) was sold in 1980 to Aetna, which later transferred it to UBS Realty Investors of Hartford, Connecticut. In 1986 the hotel came under the management of Omni Hotels of Dallas, and it was at that time that it took the name "Omni Royal Orleans".

The Omni Royal Orleans

Jazz pianist Armand Hug performed regularly at the Royal Orleans for decades. He started off young, playing with the New Orleans Owls in 1928 (primarily for the dancers in the ballroom of the Roosevelt Hotel). In the world of cinema, the book "Hotel" (and movie) was based on author Arthur Hailey's stays at the Royal Orleans; and in "Live and Let Die" (1973), James Bond is a guest at the Royal Orleans.

From movie stars to presidents, visitors to the hotel have included Muhammad Ali, Richard Nixon, David Brinkley, Luciano Pavarotti, Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones, Jane Fonda, Robert Redford, Charlton Heston, Louis Armstrong Paul Newman, Bette Davis and the rock band Led Zeppelin (who recorded a song entitled "Royal Orleans" reportedly based on an incident that occurred there in the 1970s). Patti LaBelle ("Hey sister, go sister, soul sister, go sister") received the key to the city at the hotel, and even Lassie the dog stayed there.

The intimate *Pipkin Room* (the 12-seat private dining room 15 steps below the *Rib Room*) served as the incubator for the ideas leading to the Superdome and later, the Louisiana Jazz and Heritage Festival.

Built in 1886, the family-owned and run Hotel Monteleone is an historic New Orleans landmark.

June 13th, 2008, it was announced that the Omni Royal Orleans Hotel returned to local ownership after nearly thirty years. The new partnership was led by Darryl Berger, Jr., of DBJ Investments and Joe Jaeger of Mechanical Construction Company, along with investors, Darryl Berger, Sr., and Roger Ogden of New Orleans. UBS was the seller of the seven-story gem, and the local ownership deal was financed by the Whitney National Bank and Capital One, both of New Orleans. Co-investing with the local partnership was Crow Holdings of Dallas (affiliated with the family of Texas real estate giant, Trammell Crow).

This history of early French Quarter hotels takes us up to the turn of the Nineteenth into the Twentieth Century, for it wasn't until that time that the Monteleone was established. In 1886, a Sicilian shoe cobbler purchased the Commercial Hotel and later gave it his own name as the Hotel Monteleone after 1900. It sits proudly on the corner of Royal and Iberville streets and has been host to distinguished Southern authors and other interesting guests, but that fascinating narrative will be left for another time. In the meantime, visit its unique Carousel Bar & Lounge.

Many early hotels have come and gone, but from 1836 to 1915, the Old St. Louis had its memorable years of glory. And from 1960 to the present day, the (Omni) Royal Orleans has continued to be a shining example of what a truly fine New Orleans hotel can be.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Early French Quarter Hotels"
Ned Hémard
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